DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 273 219 HE 019 635

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TITLE The Academic Socialization of Successful Asian-American College Students.
PUB DATE Apr 86
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (67th, San Francisco, CA, April 16-20, 1986).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS *Academic Achievement; *Asian Americans; *College Students; *Cultural Influences; *High Achievement; Higher Education; Learning Motivation; *Parent Student Relationship; Socialization; Values

ABSTRACT

The family backgrounds of successful Asian students were examined to generate testable hypotheses about the socialization of exemplary school achievement of these students. Structured interviews were conducted with 15 Asian students, all of whom would be considered in the top 5% of achievement nationally. These were Harvard University undergraduates, high school summer students at Harvard, or siblings of Harvard students. The sample contained roughly equal numbers of Chinese, Japanese, and Korean youth. All were immigrants' children, some born in the United States and others not. With two exceptions, the parents' schooling level in Asia and their occupational level in the United States were both relatively high; a number of parents came to the United States on scholarship. The more uniform factor in the home environment was a positive feedback loop between strong family feelings and parent emphasis on education. A constellation of factors labeled "academic socialization" were identified that includes authoritative families, high expectancies, effort emphasis in attributions, oversight of children's time utilization, priority allocation of tutorial or other resources for acceleration or remediation, and reinforcement of beliefs and behaviors conducive to instruction. (SW)

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The Academic Socialization of Successful Asian-American College Students

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San Francisco
April 1986

HE 019 635

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The academic and occupational achievement of Asian immigrants to the United States has been much celebrated in recent years. One remarkable manifestation of success is the relatively high percentage of Harvard students who are Asian, a figure which approaches 10 percent. In a comprehensive review, Vernon concludes that the most defensible explanation of Asian-American achievement centers on family structure and value systems. Our research therefore examines the home backgrounds of successful Asian students in an attempt to generate testable hypotheses about the socialization of exemplary school achievement.

We conducted 90 minute structured interviews with fifteen Asian students, all of whom would be considered in the top five percent of achievement nationally. These were Harvard undergraduates, high school summer students at Harvard or siblings of Harvard students; they volunteered and each was paid six dollars.

The sample contained roughly equal numbers of Chinese, Japanese, and Korean youth, with all being immigrants' children , some born in the U.S. and others not. With two exceptions, the parents' schooling level in Asia and their occupational level here were both relatively

high; a number of parents came here on scholarship. It will obviously be essential for future research to analyze the influence of class on Asian socialization, to distinguish among various waves of immigration, and to employ proper control groups, including unsuccessful Asian-Americans.

Interviews began with an open-ended request for salient autobiographical memories about learning, and continued with approximately thirty questions covering a range of issues. These included assessments of parental instructional styles, parental attitudes and practices in child rearing, family involvement in the child's perception of and coping with school in the early years and, also, self-assessment of the subject's current responses to academic challenges. A table of potentially significant persons, settings, and subject matters associated with learning was provided to cue episodic retrieval.

While the interviews revealed many differences among the families, our analysis, essentially an informal inductive search for striking themes, suggests that it is possible to abstract prototypical tendencies in Asian-American child rearing. By distinguishing factors which seem variable from those which characterize the upbringing of a large percentage (and occasionally all) of the sample, we hope to generate hypotheses for further testing.

The first question the data address is whether parental influence depends on the kind of sensitive tutorial scaffolding that Rogoff and others talk about, or whether the major parental influence is a more general valuation of learning. The latter seems more likely given the observed variability in parental tutoring style along three dimensions. First, parents varied in the extent to which they had the time and/or skill to tutor. Second, the sample was divided on whether they considered a parent a patient tutor or rather an impatient and undesirable one. And third, a tendency identified by Hatano for Asian parents to emphasize rote efficiency over insight or creativity in learning is inconsistently represented in these reports. Some parents never wanted their children to ask "Why?", but others deliberately emphasized creativity- for example, by papering walls with writing paper.

The more uniform factor in the home environment was a positive feedback loop between strong family feelings and parentally instilled respect for education, often with guilt about parental sacrifice as the mediator between the two. The most direct index of the strong family structure is the absence of a single divorce in the whole sample. Two other, curious facts can be taken as indirect indices: These Asian-American parents tend not to use babysitters and not to give their children freely spendable allowances. Both choices seem to

reflect a desire to play a direct oversight role in their children's activities. The emphasis on educational study as the principal obligation of the child was equally pervasive. This represented a mixture of a desire for economic advancement, a traditional reverence for scholars, and some degree of threat that mediocrity would lead to dire economic insecurity. The extent to which the child's entire community would harp on getting into a good college could be comical. Contrary to some stereotypes, parents were not uniformly negative about sports in this sample. The important consideration is that academic study always had to take priority.

The reciprocity of parents showing love by providing the best possible opportunities for learning, and children returning love by doing their best was quite rich and explicit. The children were told that any investment in tutors, books, music lessons, summer schools, etc. was worthwhile, even if it required stretched budgets and longer parental working hours. At the furthest extreme were family moves to relocate into better school systems. Indeed, many cited enhanced education as the reason parents immigrate or even send children here with caretakers.

The motivational regimen that worked so well for these subjects was not one of large extrinsic rewards. Parents held uniformly high expectations for achievement. Good rather than excellent, A- rather

than A, and so on were often greeted with a nonpunitive but insistent demand that the child had the ability to do better. If a child eventually proved to have no talent for, say, the piano, the parents might allow the activity to lapse. But it was clear that most of our subjects had internalized the same bias toward effort attributions of the type Hess has identified in Japan. And this belief that, quote, "There's nothing you can't handle if you try hard enough" entered in an instrumental relation to parental expectations. The belief then is that effort can assure the fulfillment of parental expectations. It is notable that the great majority received only muted, sparing praise, and only a few ever received material rewards for good grades. An alternate, and apparently pervasive, motivating technique was nonridiculing comparison of the child's performance to exemplary models. First, the ethnic newspapers seem to obsess over high achieving students and parents point out these stories. Secondly, the child was often kept abreast of how other parents' children were doing, thus providing older role models and also peer competition.

The major factor which may actualize the achievement potential of this motive pattern is the strict control of after-school time most parents exerted, a control which varied from making sure homework was done to only permitting one afternoon a week to play with friends. Many parents assisted with homework difficulties, and those less able

to do so certainly inquired about the child's progress. In some cases, sibling tutoring supplemented the parental contribution. On the one hand, there was an emphasis on scheduling library trips, music lessons, etc. On the other, there was a slight tendency to discourage unlimited play, and strong regulation of both the quantity and quality of television. More problematical is the report by some subjects that they had few friends in grade school and that this led them to engage in more solitary learning. Some parents seemed to actually abet this isolation by, for instance, discouraging the child from inviting anyone into the home.

The parental reaction to a school difficulty tended to be an exaggeration of the tripartite pattern we have outlined up to this point: Provide additional remedial resources such as workbooks and tutoring drill. Elicit greater effort. And constrain outside activities.

However, one reason problems were not likely to arise was the prevalence of accelerated exposure to the basic school curriculum. Prior to and outside of school, many parents taught their children basic math with diverse activities such as counting pennies, memorizing the Chinese multiplication table and solving geometry problems during car trips. For some children, there was strong emphasis on overlearning critical lessons so that they would not have to be learned more than once. In reading, where parents' language

handicaps were often a factor, some ingenious learning strategies were devised, including having a young child define English words for a Chinese grandmother, copying English text, explaining text to a mother, and doing weekly composition assignments outside school. An equally surprising departure from the norm was the existence of several cases where the child attended summer school for acceleration, mostly early in high school but in one case in grade school as well. Combining this practice with the tendency to schedule learning time after the school day, we see that some of our subjects experienced in this country a de facto duplication of the longer school year and longer school day Stevenson reports for some Asian countries.

This accelerated passage through the private world of cognitive skill was facilitated by several loosely related conditions defining the relation of the child to society. First, while there was a sense for some students that, as a minority, they had to do better to obtain the same rewards, this was not pervasive. It is more important to note the complete absence of feelings that the school threatened the student's cultural identity. By contrast, according to Ogbu, this is a serious problem for American blacks.

Secondly, the most crucial agent in the child's world outside the family is the teacher. And the uniform report of our sample is that a more or less unquestioning respect for teachers was inculcated at

home, even if the amount of direct parent involvement in school varied with language fluency. One subject remarked that the disorders in her American classroom were a vivid contrast to the quiet discipline of her Saturday Japanese class. Another subject said her mother insisted she take small gifts to the teacher. And a third even reported that when she once swore at her mother, the response was, "I hope you don't talk that way to your teacher."

A related third form of socialization for school adjustment is the reported strong discouragement Asian children receive about fighting. Some children were instructed to deal with conflict by ignoring it and inducing the other person to lose interest. Just as the economist Sowell has observed that Asians in the United States have shunned political conflict in favor of entrepreneurial activity, so one might conjecture that in the microcosm of school society the child is urged to do about the same-- avoid conflicts that reduce concentration on academic work.

A final way in which many Asian parents shaped the child's study habits is the absence of any pressure to contribute to the daily household chores. As one subject put it, "Studying could get you out of 99 percent of anything." Clearly, by not imposing chores, the parents simultaneously made more study time available, provided an incentive to study, and increased the sense of obligation to the parent.

A striking extension of this behavior is the many cases where parents discouraged any part-time work in high school and college-- even absorbing the cost of the campus job part of an aid package. The same concern for uninterrupted studies underlies an apparent resistance some parents have to the increasingly common idea that a few years of work should intervene between college and graduate school.

There were also some quite unexpected discoveries: For instance, a question about the kind of discussions the family engaged in led to several statements that the family was very quiet and did not talk much around the dinner table or elsewhere. If this unexpected observation of low verbal activity, in any language, is combined with the deemphasizing of social skills, one sees how the low representation of Asian-Americans in law, compared to science and medicine, might be a byproduct of socialization.

At the end of the interview, the students were asked to speculate about how they might have been different had they grown up in a white majority family. In many respects, they see majority upbringing as the inverse of their own. That is, they believed they would have had parents who gave them more freedom, but possibly cared less about their welfare, and that they would have had a less positive image of academic achievement and less willingness to work hard, but more developed social skills. Yet the difference between the experience of

Asian-Americans and the rest of us should not be exaggerated because they reported many of the same concerns about laziness, procrastination, daydreaming, study anxiety, and cramming that everyone else feels.

In conclusion, a constellation of factors we call "academic socialization" has been identified which includes authoritative families, high expectancies, effort emphasis in attributions, oversight of children's time utilization, priority allocation of tutorial or other resources for acceleration or remediation, and reinforcement of beliefs and behaviors conducive to instruction. Surveys and experimental methods should be used to examine these issues of Asian-American socialization in depth, and to assess costs as well as benefits in development within the otherwise equated context of American schools. If it is true, as Entwisle suggests in her book Early Schooling, that achievement differences become frozen in primary school, and that adjustment there is influenced by home factors which remain unspecified, then analytic comparisons of ethnic differences in academic socialization may provide insight into the causes of success and failure in primary school.

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